

To Die in Łódź

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This August 2019 I went to Poland to attend a meeting of my mother's family, descendants of former inhabitants and survivors of the Łódź city ghetto, liquidated by the Nazis 75 years ago. Of the 200,000 Jews confined to four square kilometers and forced to work as slaves since 1942, less than 10,000 have managed to escape. All the others died of starvation, disease, executions and in the gas chambers and crematory ovens of Chelmno and Auschwitz.

A small tragedy, compared with the horrors of the planned extermination of 6 million Jews, including 500,000 in the Warsaw ghetto, not to mention the tens of millions killed in the Soviet Union, China and other countries in World War II. But each tragedy, with its stories of endurance, death, and survival, is unique and immeasurable, and must always be remembered to understand what happened and prevent its repetition.

In 1961, writing about the Adolph Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt created a great controversy by talking about the "banality of evil," the routine and bureaucratic way in which Eichmann, and by extension the Nazi government, ran the extermination machine. apparently devoid of any sensitivity or motivation of hatred, simply "obeying orders." To her critics, this interpretation was unacceptable because it somehow exempted the Nazis from guilt and responsibility for their atrocities, for which they should be condemned and punished.

I think Hannah Arendt spoke of a much deeper and more disturbing guilt, the normalization of violence, which brings the problem of responsibility much closer to each of us than we would like to acknowledge. To varying degrees, we are somehow numbed by the absurdities and tragedies we witness in our daily lives, or that come to us every moment on the news, simply to continue to survive. Rather than a humanity divided between moral monsters, on the one hand, and just and innocent people on the other, what we have are imperfect human beings who adapt to the circumstances in which they live and may be capable, in extreme situations, of both terrible, evil actions and ethical, heroic and morally upright behaviors. Are we either fully guilty or fully innocent?

There are two questions that arise here, why these violent and destructive behaviors grow and take root at certain times, and why they are accepted by people who do not think or act in the same way but become conniving.

One of the big questions about World War II is how Germany, until then such a prominent country of science, culture and philosophy, came to these extremes, with the support or at least the passivity of much of its population. One explanation is the economic and institutional crisis of the 1920s, which led to the growing political polarization and opened the way for a demagogue who, promising a future of grandeur, gave voice to the people's feelings of anger and frustration, freeing prejudices and stimulating the attack on a defenseless supposed

enemy, the Jews. The Nazi cult of violence, rudeness, lack of limits and anti-intellectualism were further legitimized by a whole stream of philosophers and essayists who developed authoritarian, militaristic, nationalist, populist, and racist ideologies that made Nazism and anti-Semitism increasingly "respectable" and acceptable.

But it was a limited acceptance, and much was written about the contempt aristocratic German generals felt for the former junior officer they had the illusion of being able to control. However, pragmatism prevailed, not only among the military, but among businessmen and many intellectuals, sadly including the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Hitler was in power, he embodied the will of the German people, it was an opportunity for the economy to grow and conquer new territories, and it was better to stay on his side and turn a blind eye to unpleasant details such as the extermination of Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies and political opponents.

In Łódź, the tragic version of pragmatism was the short reign of Chaim Rumkowski, a Jew appointed by the Germans as chairman of the Administrative Council - the Judenrat - and commander of the ghetto. Rumkowski made the ghetto a war supply factory, enslaving the population, and ruled with an iron fist, aided by a Jewish police forcefully cracking down on resistance and selecting people for the extermination camps, while ensuring for his group the food, living spaces, and the minimum conditions of survival that were denied to others. The justification was that, by collaborating, they could free more people from extermination and survive. In fact, Łódź's ghetto lasted a year longer than that of Warsaw, and Rumkowski and his family were among the last to be sent to the cremation ovens in 1944. In the Warsaw ghetto, at the beginning, Adam Czerniakow also tried to collaborate, but committed suicide when the Germans ordered an increase in the number of deportees. A year later, the ghetto inhabitants rebelled and were massacred by SS troops in 1943.

In Łódź as in Warsaw, the situation was extreme, the killing machine did not stop, and death was inevitable. Even so, there were still choices to be made between conformism and rebellion, even at the expense of one's own lives, ephemeral in any case. Eichmann and Rumkowski were not just parts of a machinery, they had choices they could but did not make, and these choices, when exercised, are what still allow us to maintain hope in humanity.